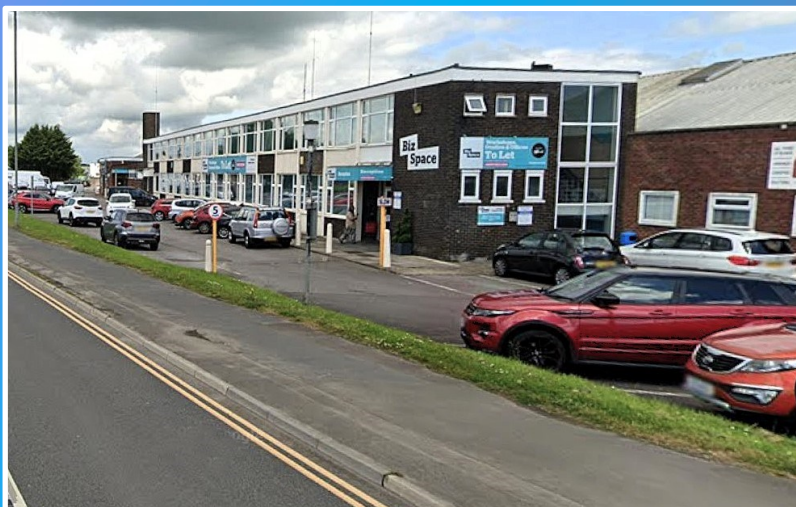


Back Then...

**Triumph
International -
Cheney Manor
1978**



The Swindon Society Newsletter - April 2026



**And
Now...**

May 2024



Welcome to the April Newsletter

Wow, that seemed like a very short interval between meetings - but still enough time for Easter to have come and gone already; I hope you all had a lovely break.

Tonight we welcome John Farrow to our meeting with his presentation entitled *South Swindon Parish Council Green Trail*. It will be good to find out more about this. There's so much to see around Swindon. So, let's take a leisurely walk with John and find out what we are missing. Enjoy!

Here's my usual reminder - anyone can contribute to the newsletter. Just send your pieces to either of the emails below. Remember - this is YOUR newsletter!

Finally, just a little note here to say that our next meeting in May includes our AGM. It's simply a formality and takes around fifteen minutes or so, so don't let it put you off coming along. To this end, the committee has decided to start the May meeting at 7.15pm rather than 7.30pm so that our planned presentation by John Stooke and Kevin Leakey is not cut short or compromised in any way - and, you will still have time for tea and a chat at the end. Sounds good doesn't it?... See you there!

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Iron, Stone & Steam Brunel's Railway Empire

Presented by
Tim Bryan
11th March 2026

Our March meeting, entitled Iron, Stone & Steam, was presented by author Tim Bryan, and based upon his book which bears the same title. Tim is the Director of the Brunel Institute at the SS Great Britain in Bristol.



Tim started his talk by telling us that between the 1830s and his death in 1859, Brunel was one of the pre-eminent railway engineers of the time, transforming the landscape of Wales, the West Country and parts of the Midlands.

His career began working on the Thames tunnel with his father, Marc Brunel, and in time, he took over the whole project. It was a hazardous job and Brunel was badly injured in one of the many floods that occurred during construction.

At the age of 24 Brunel entered a competition to design a bridge connecting Clifton

to North Somerset. He won the competition and his design was commissioned. It is what we know today as the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Unfortunately, issues with construction meant that the project ran out of money and sadly, it was only finished in 1864, after Brunel's death.



Clifton Suspension Bridge



Isambard Kingdom Brunel

From around 1825, the construction of new railway lines was the main focus for most engineers, and Brunel was no different; he saw this as a business opportunity. He was asked to survey the layout for a line between Bristol and London, using the most economic route. Brunel, however, wanted to provide the best route, not necessarily the cheapest. He had no experience of building railways, so he walked the route, creating surveys as he went. Later, he had his own mobile office in the form of a carriage, which the navvies called “the flying hearse”.

He drew up a full prospectus detailing the proposed route and the costs involved, and this was debated in Parliament. Separate committees then debated each stage of the route and the outcome was the creation of two Acts - The Bristol to Bath line and London to Reading; the rest

would be dealt with later. Following his research, Brunel laid his tracks on wooden sleepers rather than the stone blocks used by other railways, and this made the ride less bumpy. He also used a wider gauge at 7ft $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, which is referred to as broad-gauge. This meant trains were more stable and could travel faster.

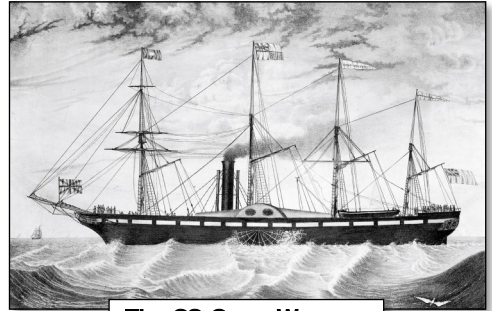
Brunel's railways were characterised with monumental structures, such as bridges and viaducts, built with style and scale. But he was also aware that some features had to blend in with the local landscape. He sketched his designs with great detail, including such details as the lampposts - and sent them to draughtsmen to draw up plans for the contractors. Brunel understood the importance of detail when it mattered, such as that of Box Tunnel. Tim showed us that the west entrance to Box Tunnel was a portal of decorative style, while the east entrance was a plain stone cutting as it would not be seen. It took Brunel four years to build this tunnel.

Many problems were encountered during construction, including a layer of Fuller's earth in the middle, and the extra expense severely delayed the opening.

Tim told us that the London end of the line was originally planned to terminate at Euston. However, broad-gauge rails were not used here, so to save goods and passengers having to transfer to normal gauge trains that ran on the existing rails, a temporary terminus was built at Paddington; this building lasted for over ten years.

The Great Western Railway was opened in stages - Bristol to Bath, London to Thames Valley, then Maidenhead. It was finally completed in 1841 following the completion of Box Tunnel.

We also learned that, at the same time the Great Western Railway was under debate, Brunel also designed a steam ship to take passengers from London to New York. The SS Great Western was a luxury paddle steamer; the first steamship purpose-built to cross the Atlantic.



The SS Great Western

Following the opening of the GWR, during the mid-1840s, Brunel was involved in the construction of many other railways, Bristol & Exeter being one of the first he worked on. He also worked on the Bristol & Gloucester Railway, through Thornbury, and the Swindon Junction line to Cheltenham, which was started by the Cheltenham and Great Western Union Railway but was completed by the GWR when funds ran out.

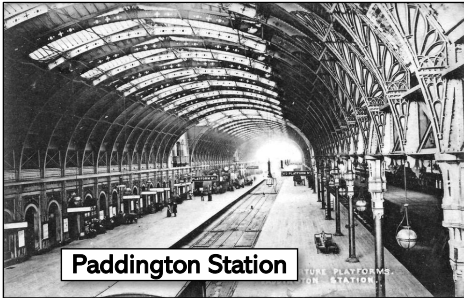
Brunel was also involved in the construction of the Oxford, Worcester & Wolverhampton Railway, which planned to meet up with the GWR. The course of the OW&WR line required a mile-long tunnel to be constructed near Mickleton in Gloucestershire. The project faced significant issues, including water, thick clay, lack of funds, and severe disputes over the construction progress. In 1851, due to slow progress, Brunel fired the contractor, Merchant, who then refused to leave the site and stopped paying workers. On 17th July 1851, Brunel and about 200 men arrived to take over, leading to a violent confrontation with the incumbent workers, which required the Riot Act to be read. The punishment for inciting a riot at that time was transportation, but Brunel was a famous engineer so he got away with it.

Not all of Brunel's projects were successful. The idea for what he called, the Atmospheric Railway, which ran on pipes of pneumatic power like a vacuum was abandoned at the cost of thousands of pounds. Although it was fast and clean, it was problematic.

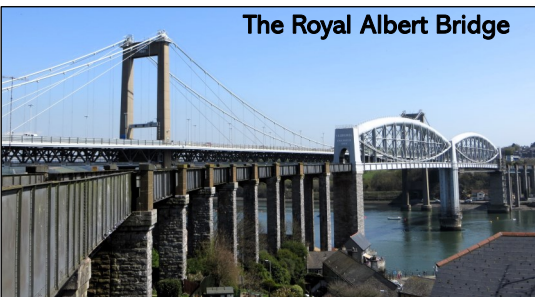
Another disappointment for Brunel was the abandonment of the broad-gauge sizing. Whenever one of his lines connected with a station using the normal gauge

of 4ft 8½ inches, goods and passengers needed to transfer to normal gauge trains. This annoying issue led to a Parliamentary decision in 1845 that stated that the normal 4ft 8½ inches gauge should be adopted across the whole railway network. Brunel's broad-gauge network was converted to normal gauge - also at great cost.

In 1850, Brunel was invited to join the committee for the Great Exhibition. He designed an exhibition hall made of bricks, but glass was pioneering at that time and it was Joseph Paxton's design that was commissioned - Crystal Palace. This gave Brunel ideas about glass structures and in 1850 he decided to replace the building at Paddington station with one that had a roof constructed of glass. It was opened in 1854, and the glass roofing structure can still be seen to this day.



Brunel's unhealthy lifestyle eventually caught up with him and in the 1850s he really slowed down. He decided to build a house in Devon and drew up plans. Unfortunately, the project took a toll on his health, along with the financial problems of constructing the SS Great Eastern. This ship was built with the capacity to transport 4,000 passengers from England to Australia without stopping to refuel. Brunel died shortly after its maiden voyage, when it suffered an explosion. Following repairs, it continued to transport passengers from Britain to North America but due to its high operating costs and non-profitability it was repurposed to lay underwater cable, laying the first lasting transatlantic telegraph cable in



between Plymouth and Saltash was opened in 1859. Known for its unique 455-foot bowstring spans, it remains the sole rail link into Cornwall

Brunel died in 1859, but so many of his structures still survive, even now. We see them and use them every day without a second thought. What a fabulous legacy he left us.

Angie Phillips - March 2026

Swindon Welding Company - 37 Queen Street 1954 -1972

My father ran a welding business from a small workshop in Queen Street which was situated behind The Parade. The building was rented from Keogh Bros who had a nearby hardware shop in Bridge Street (now Halifax Building Society). They also owned several small stores next to Dad's workshop.

Dad's green car can be seen next to his workshop, the two-storey brick building with the dark blue door facing on to Queen Street.



I can remember a few old, terraced houses opposite his workshop with their front doors opening directly on to the street. These would have been where the temporary offices are located in the above photo.

Queen Street was L-shaped from Bridge Street at one end to Fleet Street at the other, and in the middle, where it cornered, there was a building used by the Co-op in connection with their funeral business, just in front of the gas works which is all now under the Brunel Centre.

Dad's main line of work was making ornamental gates and scroll work, which he fashioned into side gates, hall telephone tables, hanging basket brackets, flowerpot holders and book ends. He was well regarded by the tradespeople in the town and many people dropped in for a chat; the jeweller, bank manager and other shopkeepers. He was called upon to repair all the prams that were taken to Normans, and shop fittings were also frequently found in

the workshop waiting to be repaired or modified.

In the upstairs workshop, Peter Joyce ran a joinery business making doors, windows and bookcases. When these were finished, they were winched out through first floor double doors down to his van parked below in the car park.



Dad and Pete had always parked their vehicles next to the workshop and they were both surprised when a car parking ticket machine suddenly appeared and they were expected to buy daily tickets. They went along with this for some time plastering all the windows with tickets, which meant it took the Traffic Wardens much longer to find the current ticket. After a while Pete got fed up with this and decided to sabotage the ticket machine. He did this by pouring tea in the slots and the sugar jammed up the paper tickets. Dad didn't take sugar, but he was in on this mischief. Frequently there was an out of order sign on the machine.

I visited the workshop every Saturday, after a trip to the Classic cinema or the swimming baths with my best friend. We arrived just before lunchtime to get our lift home as we had spent our return bus fare on the vegetable soup or crisps after swimming. When I visited, I would enjoy sweeping up the shavings and sawdust and being helpful. This was fine, except the time when Dad had painted some new gates and the sawdust fluttered down through the floorboard cracks and onto the fresh paint - he was less than pleased!

Most of Dad's steel came from Marine Mountings in Wroughton, long since gone and replaced by a housing estate. Mum did all the invoices and typed up his letters and orders on a small Adler portable typewriter.

In the school holidays my mum would ask me to post leaflets advertising Dad's gates and she would tell me to cycle over and deliver these around Northern Road or the Old Walcot area where there were drives to garages.

Even now I can recognise his style of scrolls on the gates that are still in place throughout the town. The photo on the left shows a set of Dad's ornamental gates and a small flowerpot holder to the left of the front door.



The day came when Keogh Bros decided to sell off a lot of their property; starting with the area behind Hepworths the tailors and up to, and including, the workshop. Dad was paid some compensation which was based on the scale set out in the Landlord and Tenant Act. This amounted to twice the Rateable Value, which came to £32. This was unfortunate timing for Dad as the new Valuation List was due to come into force soon after on 1st April 1973, and when it did, the Rateable Value was much higher.

Dad found a new job at Marston Meysey doing welding on agricultural machinery. He had a heart attack and died aged 47 in January 1976.

Kate Goodenough - March 2026



A Brief History of Regent Circus

As work begins on demolishing the short-lived leisure and retail development known as Regent Circus, I thought I'd write a short recap of its fleeting existence.

The demolition of Swindon College to make way for the new development began in summer 2012. At the time, I was living in Cross Street, and walking to Central Library during early pregnancy meant my already sensitive eyes were constantly irritated by the dust. I would walk down Rolleston Street with tears streaming, gripping my partner's arm so he could guide me to work. The dust settled not only on us but all over the library. Construction continued throughout 2013 and into 2014, accompanied by the relentless pounding of heavy machinery needed for the deep foundations - being at the bottom of the hill. Despite the disruption, I felt optimistic about the development - after years of empty buildings on the site, it was great to think a new supermarket and cinema would be so close.



However, the disturbances weren't without consequences. Cracks began appearing in nearby houses and buildings; I suspect our rented home was affected too, though it was hard to be certain. The most serious case was the Rehoboth Baptist Chapel on Prospect Hill, opposite the Beehive pub. It suffered such significant structural damage that it was closed for more than two years while the developers carried out repairs.

Regent Circus began opening in October 2014, with Morrisons the first business to welcome customers. This was soon followed by five chain restaurants - GBK, Coal, Ask Italian, Prezzo, and Nando's - and then by Cineworld, which opened the day before we moved from Cross Street to Church Road. After more than two years of dust and noise, we ironically moved further away just as everything opened.



Yet Regent Circus struggled from the start. Unit 4 remained empty for seven years before Boom Battle Bar eventually moved in. Fiesta de Cuba opened in Unit 3 in May 2018, and Tiffins Indian Buffet opened another long-vacant unit in January 2018. But from 2018 onwards, signs of trouble were increasingly visible.

GBK announced its closure that November, and the decline continued. Tiffins closed in September 2019, followed by Morrisons in November. The supermarket's profits had fallen, and the site was deemed no longer commercially viable. As an anchor tenant, Morrisons' departure was a major blow to the development.

Restaurants continued to come and go. Coal closed in January 2020, just before the pandemic. Ask Italian and Fiesta de Cuba both closed immediately after the first lockdown, due to its impact on business. Lamaya moved into the old GBK premises in February 2020, only to face lockdown a

month

later; they lasted until June 2022, but the unit remained empty afterwards. Dough & Co. opened in the former Prezzo unit in December 2021 but survived only a year, closing in December 2022. Funky Grilla operated from September 2021 to October 2022. Boom Battle Bar opened in October 2021, expanding across several units, including Unit 4. The Swindon & Wiltshire Pride Hub opened a volunteer-run pop-up shop next to Cineworld in June 2022, but it was only open on Saturdays. However, it seems

that by this point, the writing was on the wall. Cineworld closed in October 2024, Boom Battle Bar followed in March 2025, and the Pride Hub relocated to the Brunel Centre in June 2025.

Now only Nando's remains. Located slightly apart from the main block and highly visible, it has weathered the turbulence and will stay open during the demolition. I am once again watching the demolition of a building at Regent Circus on my daily walk into work from Prospect Place to the library. I'm hopeful the redevelopment will bring much-needed homes to the area, but it's hard not to reflect on the extraordinary waste of time, money, and resources created by constructing - and now destroying - a development that lasted less than twelve years.



Kelly Blake - March 2026

My Life in a Railway Factory - Part One

(Psst... I stole the title from a man called Alfred Williams - but please keep that quiet!)



Born into a long line of first-class engineers in 1954, I never quite achieved what my other family members had done. My great, and my great-great-grandfather were mining engineers of some substance. My grandad was involved in sewerage engineering, and my dad probably topped them all; he qualified at Technical College with top grades in both mechanical and electrical engineering.

All through WW2 Dad put this to great use, and then into a company in my hometown of Leeds called Yorkshire Imperial Metals. He rose through the ranks and his big break was being sent to India, on and off, in the early 1960s to build three factories in and around Bombay. He did this on behalf of some very rich Indian families named Ganguly, Kirmani and Dev.

Dad's achievements were very successful so the company's next challenge for him was to head out from Leeds to a town in Wiltshire called Swindon. Here, he was to open a new factory that would be ground breaking in producing extruded polypropylene plastic pipework from 12 to 24 inches.

So, on 1st February 1965 we headed south as a family, and new factory was indeed a huge success!

Five years later, it was time for his lovely little lad to leave school and get a job. Obviously it would have to be in engineering, but where?

Trainspotting was a great hobby back in the days of steam and fortunately, a neighbour in Leeds who was older and trusted by my parents, offered to take me trainspotting in York. This was so exciting for a young Andrew aged about 7 or 8. Then, whilst on the platform at York Station, Mallard - the greatest of all steam engines - came in and I was in heaven. Neighbour Eric asked the driver if we could get in the cab and thankfully, he agreed. We were also asked if we would like a ride down the longest platform at York Station and we were made up. The excitement for us all was probably too much really... we were riding in the cab of the greatest and fastest steam engine in the world! Who wouldn't agree with that!?

I had always loved railways and that would be my first choice, hence Plessey, Pressed Steel, and others were applied for, but only one direction really appealed to the young Binks... British Railway Engineering Limited and the mighty Swindon Railway Works.



One other company I applied to was Marine Mountings in Wroughton. Dad had to attend the interview with me, which he did. Halfway through the interview Dad stood up and announced "Come on Andrew, we are leaving, this man is not fit to train anyone in engineering" - so up we got and home we went!

The interview at Swindon Works Training School went well and I was so pleased to be offered an apprenticeship. Thankfully Dad thought it was great too.



Apprentice Training School 1993

So, on 3rd September 1970, a shy and quiet and probably spotty-faced 15-year-old boy turned up for his first day at the Apprentice Training School in Dean Street. I think there were about 95 of us, no one knowing exactly what to expect. But, I had left home with some astute words from my dad. "Don't fool about, take things seriously as the next year could possibly shape the rest of your hopefully long career in engineering". I took these words in because I knew that Dad had said those words for real, and that he meant me to listen, and listen well.

To be continued...

Andy Binks - March 2026

Feedback From the March Newsletter



Following the circulation of the March newsletter, we had quite a few comments regarding Debra Melsom's article entitled Memories of Old Town - Part Three.

Several people remarked about how interesting they found it - and it really was!

David Bedford was particularly impressed. He recalled that at one time, back in 2018, he had showed the war grave of Tommy Cullinan and talked about his life, from Ireland onwards, mentioning his many wins, etc. But he didn't delve into his mother's background, which is an equally remarkable part of his story - especially the fascinating link to Clare Balding! Well done Debra... In David's own words "Excellent research!"

Quick Quiz



Where in our town would you find these three little beauties?

info@theswindonsociety.co.uk



Swindon Town Station - c.1958



**Demolition of the Carpenters Arms,
Gorse Hill - 1962**

